


Francis Pott | University of West London, UK

# 'IF I WERE GOING THERE, I WOULDN'T START FROM HERE'

*A composer reflects on the perils of getting one's bearings in a new piece*



*There is, it seems to us,  
At best, only a limited value  
In the knowledge derived from experience*

**T.S. ELIOT**  
FROM FOUR QUARTETS



The apocryphal Irish response to a request for directions, which serves as a title to this piece, has often struck me as pertinent to the composer's condition. I wish I had a pound for every time somebody asks – usually with mingled wonderment and asperity – 'what kind of music do you write?' as if might be edible (it isn't), combustible (it is), or useful in score form in the smallest room (no comment). It is a question to which there is neither a clear nor a consistently true answer. One may duck its true intent by mentioning 'technique' in an externalised way. But in the parallel context of poetry, Edwin Muir wrote how the term technique '...always gives me a slightly bewildered feeling; if I can translate it as skill I am more at home with it, for skill is always a quality of the thing that is being said or done, not a general thing at all' (Knight, 1980). Muir acknowledges that, in effect, skill is inseparable from idea; the thing being 'said' indivisible from the means of saying it.

That's of little help to my interlocutor above – but it does acknowledge something about the nature of what we casually label 'inspiration'. One very seldom has a compositional idea and *then* thinks, 'I wonder how I can do that'. It has been claimed that an entire movement could spring unbidden into Mozart's brain in an instant. That seems less sensational to the jobbing composer than to the layperson, both because the norms of Classical form which Mozart was extending were fundamentally so predictable, like a vessel waiting to have the requisite content poured into it, and because local detail proceeds only later from the panoramic overview to which Classical form is especially conducive. In any case, what it fails to acknowledge is that the composer's first spontaneous mental image of his or her incipient piece is almost never borne out in the finished result. The finished result stares back at its creator, and is become 'other'. It may satisfy him or her in a variety of ways intellectual, emotional or even spiritual; but, as in a memorably gruesome scene from the film *Alien*, the incubus will have escaped its human confines in the meantime, sprouted legs and run off on them, evading his clutches until another season. Tchaikovsky is reported in various sources to have observed that every piece becomes a dress rehearsal for the next, and the foregoing comments serve to suggest how that might be so: the bit that got away becomes the starting point for the next attempt.

'Inspiration' sits amicably alongside Muir's comment, and doesn't necessarily pick a quarrel with Tchaikovsky's either. Yet the composer will not always be in the happy position of taking wing so spontaneously: there will be times when he has to kick-start the sluggish engine and force it into motion. Work on most compositions extends over days or weeks and through an entire spectrum of moods: morning, evening, night; good weather, foul weather; stress, apathy, boredom, excitement, joy, fury. These phases will embody a *mélange* of musical *mots justes*, flashes of summer lightning, tight corners, square pegs in round holes and moments of educated artifice posing as 'the real thing'. Consider, if you will, the

comedian and satirist Rory Bremner – clever, with an agile mind; an accomplished theatrical translator from German; an engaging political commentator; not, in my estimation, an especially acute mimic. The mimicry is interesting. Find, say, five defining oddities in your human subject, then play on them at a relatively consistent rate, perhaps in rotation. Make no especial effort at verisimilitude for anything up to twenty seconds in between, but rely on that handful of identifying features – and, behold, your victim's identity becomes vividly recognisable, the intervening neutrality of the other material overlooked by a forgiving audience. Apply something of the same notion to a composer of the past, the evidence of whose academic schooling arguably outweighs intermittent hints of his 'inspiration' – Glazunov, perhaps; or Stanford; or Bruch; or the up-and-coming Saint-Saëns of whom Berlioz, the Robin Williams of his day in both repartee and, oddly enough, physiognomy, notoriously remarked, 'he lacks inexperience'. In Muir's terms or, indeed, Bremner's, these composers exemplify an alternation of 'technique' and 'skill'. Perhaps, indeed, technique is merely what remains to you when 'skill' capriciously departs?

There are perhaps two other issues worth briefly reflecting upon here. One is composition's relationship to time. The other is its metaphorical parallels with language.

Music is Janus-faced. A listener's experience of the finished product is temporal; the composer's relationship with the unfinished one not necessarily so. Composers acknowledge a term, 'through-composing', by which they refer to the starting of a composition where it also begins in performance, followed by 'the continuing of the same until it be thoroughly finished'. Despite the tonic sol-fa wisdom expounded to the von Trapp family in *The Sound of Music*, the very beginning may not always be a very good place to start. Unfortunately, the default setting of the student compositional mind is that it is the only option, and this profoundly counterproductive state of affairs has been greatly aggravated by the advent of software which militates against sketching and drafting, while conspiring through cosmetic appearance to flatter the impressionable eye and mind into a 'fair copy mentality'. It looks set in stone; *ergo est* – and no questions need ever be asked again. Oh dear... In reality (a place in which relatively few student composers are to be found), the point

of entry into a new work may be anywhere. If the prize is there for the taking, then the composer may do well to imitate the action of the burglar, who seldom enters by the front door, but instead – like floodwater – finds the most permeable point. To students, I have sometimes likened the starting of a new piece to one of those monstrous jigsaw puzzles attempted only when yuletide overindulgence has largely eliminated the will to live. The first small accretion of pieces may yield clues neither to the local image which they portray, nor to its contextual place in some wider scheme of things. Gradually, however, more such islets take form, as yet unrelated and unplaceable. Some may find it helpful to complete the perimeter next, in an attempt to establish the position of the islets; this, too, offers a reasonable analogy with compositional form, or at least with some outer structural casing inside which everything else must belong.

Even when dealing with the setting of text to music, one can profitably avoid being forced into the Procrustean bed of through-composing. Poets are wont to speak evasively of 'form', which frequently boils down to whatever shape the finished product has acquired. That might seem like sophistry, yet it

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comes back to Muir's view of 'skill' and to 'the thing being said'. It also offers a certain parallel to forms of composition, such as fugue or variation over a recurrent 'ground' bass, which are inherently organic and linear rather than inclined towards recapitulation. One of the reasons why symphonic Beethoven is so arresting, is its status as a battleground between 'Classical' form and something at once older and newer. Classical sonata form might be likened to a diligent flower arrangement: left and right (or an opening 'exposition' and concluding 'recapitulation') enjoy a certain frozen symmetry, given which, the middle has only – in a simplistic sense – 'to be the middle'. Lift it out and replace it with the corresponding section from a work in the same key, and in many cases nobody would be any the wiser. What we misguidedly call 'development sections' in such music are often consciously *avoiding* recourse to the movement's main themes, both because over-exposure is laden with risk and because in any case the themes of a natural melodist do not generally lend themselves to fragmentation. They are complete as the sum of their parts, not as the parts, just as a radio works better intact than smashed to smithereens with a hammer – and we do not need to know how a radio's components work in order to appreciate what comes out of the assembled object.

In contrast, the process of metamorphosis set in motion by the first movement of Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony cannot be wound back to its point of origin, however strenuously Classical form may insist. Once metamorphosis has got hold of the acorn and turned it into an oak tree, it will be difficult to return it to the jam jar whence it came. And yet, while much organic and linear music of this type may be imbued with a kind of compulsive directional certitude, thus lending itself to relatively lengthy stretches of 'through-composition', even this may have come together haphazardly from inchoate shards of an idea. Another of my favoured analogies to students is the *whodunit* – if you write one, you must start from the solution or *dénouement* as your starting point, even though this is in effect the end. Only then can you work backwards, teasing out cause and effect at the same time as rationalising how to feed the withheld content incrementally to your reader. Kierkegaard caught something of this in his celebrated remark that life had to be lived forwards but understood backwards. It is a position which our

Irish roadside helper in my title would recognise: you can't go there without working out where best to start from. And so it is sometimes, I think, with Beethoven: areas of local detail will have been the product of the summer lightning mentioned earlier – the momentary felicity, the fleeting inspiration caught on the wing in the mental butterfly net. But the generality is an implacable sense of gravitational homing towards an inevitable conclusion. We may not be able to do likewise, but we can certainly look, and listen, and prod and poke, and climb around inside the structure, and see *how it is done*.

Much nonsense is talked about music as a language, but composers themselves have tended to concentrate on the fault line separating the two: music beginning where words are powerless to express (Debussy and, earlier, Mendelssohn, among others); music powerless to 'express' (in any literal sense) anything (Stravinsky); etc. This paradoxical focus on blurred abstractions mirrors a common human trait of defining one thing in the terms of another: thus the Swedish symphonist Franz Berwald became 'the Berlioz of the North', just as Bruges is sometimes compared in similar terms with Venice, or St Petersburg with Buenos Aires. 'Wagner is the Puccini of music', allegedly wrote J.B. Morton with rather more mischief in mind. But music is not the language of anything. At a conference convened by my colleague Robert Sholl in 2008, Peter Bannister arrestingly argued that music, like God, is irreducible to anything beyond itself; therefore the believer's inability to say what – in the deepest sense – is 'going on' in music mirrors his or her incapacity to articulate what is 'going on' with the divine.

Despite this, for the composer, the viably linguistic dimension of music may be less a sense of the numinous, more the mundane mechanics of its 'parts of speech'. The moments which he permits himself to recognise as flowerings of inspiration may seem to have some parallel with those fragments of a poem which both leap visually off the printed page and orally capture ear and imagination. But there are also the musical prepositions and conjunctions, the humdrum linkages and dutiful gerunds and unavoidably platitudinous turns of phrase whose destiny is but seldom to transcend the functional. In fact, they are the 'Bremner' or 'Saint-Saëns' moments where what is settled for is merely adequate – fit for purpose in a way that still lowers the bar. These



may have a certain transient neutrality, failing to proclaim the stamp of their individual creator, but they *could* also be elevated by exercise of well-ordered compositional craft. Sometimes a revelatory instant of the hoped-for magic may be a mere semiquaver out of reach, a narrow miss – like the tantalising story that Bach and Handel once passed through the same city on the same day, attempted to meet and, being but human, failed for all eternity.

I am currently constructing a 20-minute piece for mezzo-soprano, chorus and orchestra. The text is a collation of materials, some of which require a labyrinthine ordeal of copyright clearance (still in progress). At the time of writing, balancing passages from the beginning and end have taken form, like musical book-ends. A kind of dynamic shape established itself in the early stages of manipulating the 'libretto', which draws partly upon Psalm 107, thus placing a marine storm at the centre and a metaphorical, existential return to safe harbour at the end. Musical motifs have been tried and tested, some retained and some rejected. This is a case of determining what hoops one requires one's raw material to jump through, then fashioning it accordingly: if you want to go there, work out your point of departure. To add to the complexity, some passages tend to come with sonority an integral part of the idea, and thus to require immediate scoring for orchestra; others to be sufficient unto the day, demanding at this stage only 'short score' notation on two or three musical staves. That precipitates the yuletide jigsaw effect with a vengeance: discontinuous papers of all shapes and sizes, covered with passages for anything between one instrument and at least sixty. I always compose in longhand, sometimes at the piano, sometimes not, going to the *Sibelius* software only when the finished score is ready for origination in print, and find the spatial dimension of a piece pinned all around the room much more liberating than the confining geometry of the computer monitor. When composing *Le Sacre du Printemps* in 1912-13, Stravinsky festooned the walls of his rented Parisian apartment with manuscript



paper, before working around it like a decorator (whom, in a sense, he became). Presumably like him, I rather enjoy the sense that on a Friday one may be scribbling on the wall above the desk, then suddenly realise that what one is doing relates back to what one did under the radiator on Monday.

It may be no accident that a number of composers have excelled at the combination of spatial thinking and planning ahead required in chess – in the twentieth century Frank Martin and Sergei Prokofiev, to name but two. In the words of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: 'Man is but a network of relationships, and these alone matter to him'. That seems a very fair encapsulation of the composer's mentality, too, and of the elusive, shifting matrix on which the compositional game plays itself out.

But we can't go there today. I started from the wrong place.

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